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A Journal of Brief Literature

Boxed In

(https://citronreview.com/2016/12/22/boxed-in/)

December 22, 2016 (<https://citronreview.com/2016/12/22/boxed-in/>) by The Citron Review

by Jennifer Lang

“Hey, so have you bought a plot yet?” our friend Seth asks as we round the bend of Kfar Nahman cemetery, one of two in our quiet city of Raanana, Israel, a place that, even after four years, still feels like the other side of the world from my California-girl reference point. I squeeze my lips together. My husband sniggers. Seth, his wife, and my spouse share a similar noir sense of humor, often poking fun at my inability to laugh about cancer, ISIS beheadings or country-wide stabbings, reminding me we’re all going to end up in the same place anyhow—dead. I know that. But I’m loathe to say my life will end *here*.

We live in this tiny hotspot because of Philippe, who, after a dozen years in America—six on the west coast, six on the east—realized during a semi-sabbatical year in Raanana that living in my homeland rendered him numb. In Israel, he flourished. I recoiled like a snail. After returning to New York, we agreed to try again—three years later—since our eldest enlisted with the Israel Defense Forces, and we wanted to keep our family together. My silence is complicated. My spouse understands.

The issue of aging—from growing old to retiring to growing older to dying to being buried—lives in Pandora’s un-openable box alongside other issues like Jewish observance. I drive and use electricity on the Sabbath. He doesn’t.

Part of what irks me about Israel is the religious dichotomy; you're either observant or secular, a believer or non-believer, and while my husband identifies as the former, I fall into the latter. Ours is a mixed marriage. Grey among black-or-white.

Up until the day we boarded the plane from America back to his Promised Land, I reminded him of my ten-year commitment—to live here from the time of child number one entering the army to child number three ending the army. I quietly note each year as it passes. Four down, six to go. When I think about what that represents—72 months; 2,190 days; 52,560 hours; or 1.892×10^8 seconds whatever “e” means—I force myself to act strong. Like a soldier. Like my son, and now like my daughter.

A few months ago, shortly after celebrating our fiftieth birthdays, I became consumed by thoughts of missiles, knives, car rammings, suicide bombers, and, most of all, the feeling of fear. For my life, for my family's. For the future of Israel.

I do not think I am capable of living here for the long haul, as I gradually lose muscle tone and brain neurons and possibly the energy it takes to pack up, relocate, and start anew, and fret about reaching a point where I feel stuck. Should I stay? Or should I go?

It's impossible to predict that not-so-far-off future, but what if I yearn to return to my native English-speaking country where there is clear separation between Church and State and more land and greater distances and in all that wide, open space, a place to live a small, relatively peaceful life—but Philippe refuses to come? The kids are the wild card. Where will they settle? In Israel, which they adopted as teenagers, in America, where they sound like they belong, or in some other undetermined destination, depending on where they study, what they do, and with whom they fall in love? I cannot picture them then. Older, oldish, adults. They will be twenty-seven, twenty-four, and twenty-two, independent and autonomous and free to choose where, how and with whom to live. If one moves to the U.S., would I follow? What about two?

Should all three end up leaving Israel, opting for the New World instead, I would not hesitate. But what does that say about my marriage? About me? That it is doomed, that my husband matters less than my children, that I am selfish, or that I just need a good excuse to make my exit?

Either way, I'll be screwed. World news will trigger nightmares. Because if separated from any of them by oceans and an unbearable plane ride I will feel a wrenching in my gut, a tugging in my chest whether I remain here and they flock there or vice versa; but, if vice versa, and any one or more members of my immediate family remains here, in Israel, I will crumble every time the fragile illusion of peace degenerates. Hamas and Hezbollah hate us. War is inexorable.

Over the past forty-eight months, we have endured seven days of Operation Pillar of Defense, fifty days of Operation Protective Edge and an onslaught of random knifings with about fifteen months respite in between. My nerves feel shattered. My kishkes are made of mush, not steel.

Sometimes I feel suffocated by all the boxes in which I live: religious, political, marital, parental, even geographical. Israel is roughly the same size as Vancouver Island. Inadequate.

Seth and his wife, my other half, and all of our friends—born in America, Canada, England, South Africa, Australia, France, and Russia—have embraced every one of those boxes and planted roots here and share a certainty, a knowing, a connection that bewilders me despite a half a dozen visits from my early childhood until my early twenties, when I unexpectedly met and fell in love with Philippe and stayed.

Maybe the issue is me. Maybe I need a new box.

I think about Pandora, the first woman on earth in Greek mythology, and the jar she received as a gift, which, when she opened it, released death and many other evils, leaving only hope at the bottom.

Maybe I should move in with her. Or maybe I already have.

Jennifer Lang's essays have been published in *Under the Sun* ("Things Lost, Things Found" nominated for Pushcart Prize 2017), *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women*, among others. Occasionally, she contributes to the Wall Street Journal's Expat column. This past summer, she received a MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, leaving her ample time to finish her first book, *Uprooted: A Memoir of Marriage, Faith, and a Faraway Land*.

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Hug, Jill Katherine Chmelko, 2019

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